Blaming Social Media For Suicide Is Taking The Easy, And Likely Wrong, Way Out

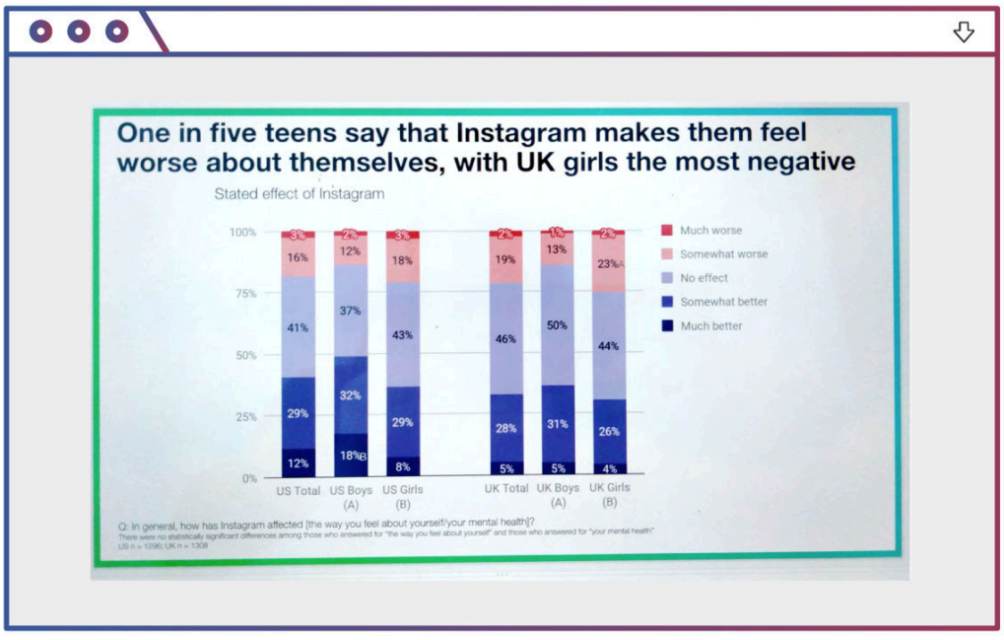
from the *the-data-just-isn't-there* dept

Thu, Jul 21st 2022 12:03pm - **Mike Masnick**

Studies

It's seems to have become accepted wisdom by many — including policymakers — that social media is dangerous for kids. But every time we look at the details, **the data is lacking**. This is not for a lack of trying, of course. There have been tons of studies that *try* to make the link, but most of them fail to turn up anything significant. It's not that there aren't kids who are depressed and/or suicidal. There are. And many of them are on social media. Because basically all kids are these days. But making the link is what's difficult.

Some of the people pushing this narrative just like to ignore inconvenient facts. Remember, of course, all the interest in Frances Haugen's leaked files from inside Facebook/Instagram. The headline story was that Facebook knew that Instagram made girls feel worse about themselves. But **the reality** was that the study showed that it made a much higher percentage feel better about themselves.



But that version doesn't make headlines.

Of course, one of the leading voices promoting this message is Jonathan Haidt, who has argued repeatedly that social media is leading to more depression and suicide. However, Taylor Barkley, over at the Center for Growth and Opportunity, recently had an interesting article that broke down the data. Haidt highlighted suicide statistics for teenagers from 2000 to 2020. And, from there, you see a slight, but noticeable uptick after 2015:

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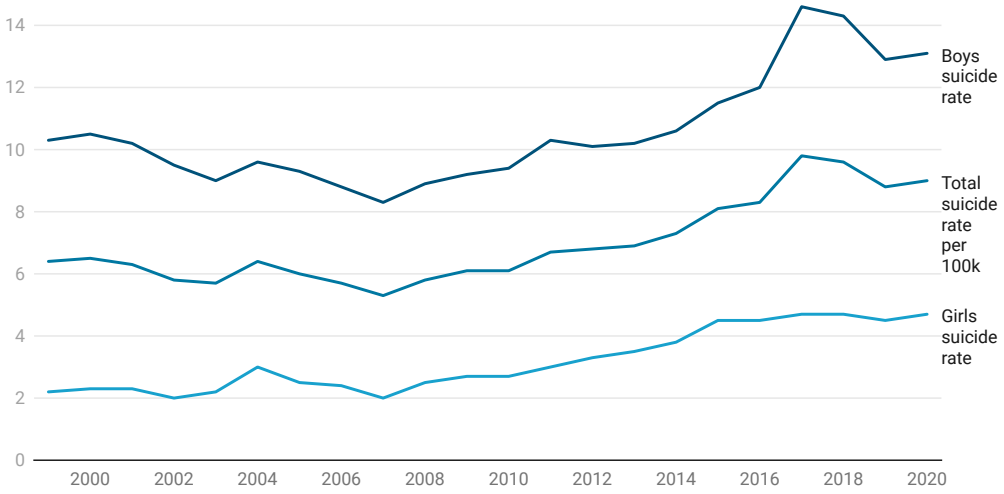
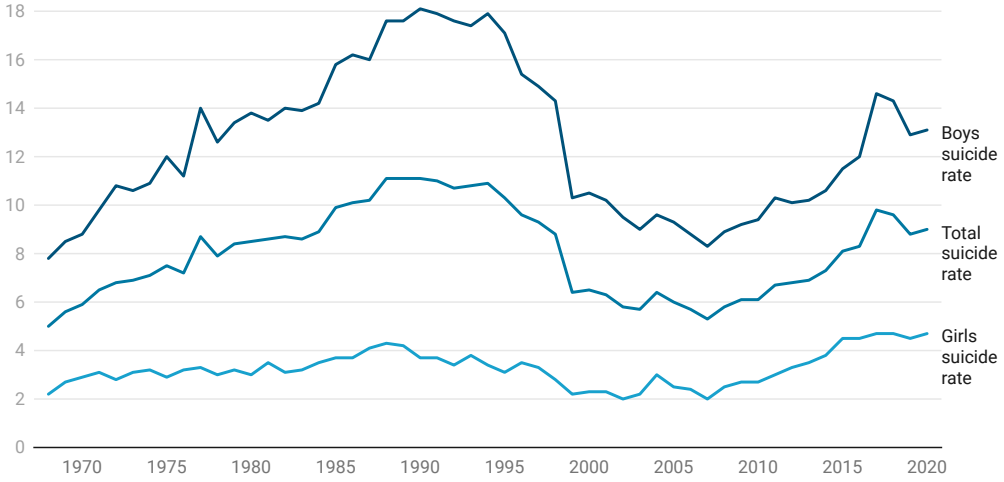


Chart: Will Rinehart • Source: CDC Wonder • Get the data • Embed • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

But... as Barkley notes, if you actually go past 2000, and look at the data from the CDC back to 1968, the story seems somewhat different:

Teen (15-19) suicide rate per 100k



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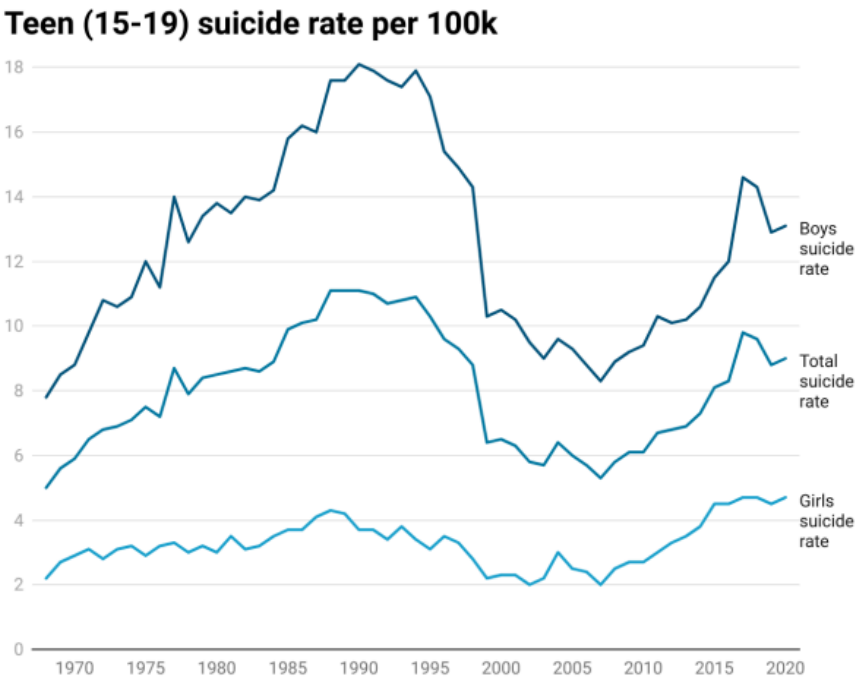

So that's all kind of fascinating. Basically the suicide rate for teens was *way* higher in the late 80s and early 90s before dropping again in the late 90s and early 2000s. The current uptick is still mostly below the highs from a few decades ago, and obviously back then there really wasn't social media.

It's almost as if there might be something else going on. Social media may be having some impact here -- but the general data suggests there's likely a lot more at play, and a bunch of factors likely contribute to suicide rates.

And, as we've said before, **social media is an easy scapegoat** for politicians who don't want to do the work to understand the actual root causes of societal problems. This is why California **is moving forward** with its bill that states, upfront, that it's "proven" that social media is bad for kids. It's why next week **the Senate will hold a hearing** on the dangerous Kids Online Safety Act that would **create universal surveillance of kids online**, based on the unproven belief that social media is harming them.

These are being pushed by either deeply confused or deeply cynical politicians who simply don't want to actually do the work to figure out why suicide rates have ticked up recently, but are absolutely sure it must be social media.

There are real issues here. Figuring out why suicide rates for teens have gone up deserves actual careful study -- not grandstanding politicians with big ideas.

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Rico R. (profile) July 21, 2022 at 12:39 pm

As someone whose teenage years are not a distant memory compared to others here, I can see *why* people are quick to blame social media platforms for negatively affecting people's mental health. I'm sure this is true even for adults using social media: People post their "highlight reels" on social media, but then we compare everyone's "highlight reels" to our own "blooper reels". In other words, people tend to post their highs and most joyous moments online, but then we compare everyone else's posts to our own lows. This seems more like a societal issue, and I'm sure this concept isn't solely limited to social media.

However, instead of finding ways to deal with these societal issues and improving access to mental health services, politicians blame "social media" and "big tech" for our kids' problems and expect them to either "protect minors' mental health perfectly" or ban people under 18 from joining social media. People are already lying about being 13 or older to create social media accounts. Therefore, the latter won't work. And short of trying to "nerd harder", social media can't block every problematic content for kids, and that will open them up to liability and potential lawsuits.

And I know from personal experience. When I was 20, at one of my lowest moments, I made a post on Tumblr seeking out help because, at the time, I felt I had no one to talk to. People reached out to me, and I talked to one of them about what was going on. Overall, the post and the people who reached out because of it helped me feel better.

But imagine if Tumblr had to "shadow ban" my post because it could "negatively affect teens". No one would see it, no one would reach out, and who knows what would have happened? I'm in a better place now, but simply blaming young people's mental health issues all on social media platforms will not only prevent people from seeking help if they need it, but it makes them liable for things far beyond their control. This isn't a good solution, but I suppose to those within the world of politics, doing something wrong to try to solve a real problem is better than not doing anything to solve the problem at all!

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Naughty Autie July 21, 2022 at 12:40 pm

Blaming Social Media For Suicide Is Taking The Easy, And Likely Wrong, Way Out

And yet for many in Congress, political suicide seems like the *only* way out. 😉

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ECA (profile) July 21, 2022 at 1:51 pm

this may be a very interesting topic.

Anyone have the facts of the working conditions in the EU?
Better time off
Less hours working
Men get Lots of time off for a child born

Anyone remember when taking your kid to work WASNT going to get you FIRED? When yuo Taught your kid, YOUR job, and mos ttimes it was a real learning experience?
We can go back along ways in many tribes where the kids Worked with the adults who Taught them LIFE skills and they got ALONG with the kids and understood what was happening, and GUILT wasnt much of a worry for Either side.

In the last 30 years, the question is, WHO IS AT HOME? Who is taking care of your kids? WHO is answering and teaching them the BASICS, at the least.

Then we get WHO is responsible for this?
Point fingers, and DONT even LOOK at the real BASIC problem.

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Anonymous Coward July 21, 2022 at 1:54 pm

So it was falling from… *checks notes* the advent of the internet, until… the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing lost decade and continual fall in living standards and life prospects for the youth of the era?

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Anonymous Coward July 21, 2022 at 2:01 pm

There's a problem in social networks, sure- only it's not from the network part, it's from the social side.

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That Anonymous Coward (profile) July 21, 2022 at 3:41 pm

Someone whip up a chart tracking BoJo screw ups with spikes in UK girls feeling bad about themselves.

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[2]

Naughty Autie July 21, 2022 at 5:45 pm

Re:

It can't be done, unfortunately. Bojo screwed up way more times than girls here felt bad about themselves.

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Kenn July 21, 2022 at 4:13 pm

It's the same old story. Start with your conclusion, find a graph, set the start date of the graph so it matches your predetermined conclusion, publish and hope nobody like Techdirt checks your data. Actually the authors don't care about their data being checked since most readers of their propaganda don't look at alternate viewpoints.

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[2]

Naughty Autie July 21, 2022 at 5:48 pm

Re:

Start with your conclusion, find a graph, set the start date of the graph so it matches your predetermined conclusion, publish and hope nobody like Techdirt checks your data.

That's actually very similar to how Simon Baron-Cohen conducts his 'research'. The only difference is that he doesn't use graphs except for illustrative purposes.

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kristakis (profile) July 21, 2022 at 7:58 pm

Charts relating to humans living in the US, with years along the bottom, should have red and blue shading to show the current political climate.

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Jonathan Haidt July 22, 2022 at 4:14 am

From Haidt: Here's all of my data

Thanks for this critique. You are right that for boys, the rate used to be higher. But for girls, we are now at the highest rates ever recorded. For boys the links to social media are weak, at best. for girls they are much stronger. I put all of my data on the trends here: **https://docs.google.com/document/d/1diMvsMeRphUH7E6D1d_J7R6WbDdgnzFHDHPx9HXzR5o/edit#head**

see especially p. 85, my debate with chris ferguson, where i address the causes of the 1980s spike in boys suicides.

then see this doc on the evidence that social media is a cause, not just a correlate, for girls:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1w-HOfseF2wF9YIpXwUUtP65-olnkPyWcgF5BiAtBEy0/edit

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[2]

Naughty Autie July 22, 2022 at 5:35 am

Re:

By using data only about social media and only from 2014, you've cherry-picked to come to the conclusion that the data support your hypothesis. Look at data from all years regarding all social contact (including within the family) and you'll find that they don't.

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Anonymous Coward July 22, 2022 at 11:15 am

And who is friendly with lawyers who have defended websites whose primary purpose is to drive the neurodivergent into committing suicide?

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[2]

Anonymous Coward August 1, 2022 at 1:23 pm

Re:

DBA Phillip Cross, obviously.

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[2]

Anonymous Coward September 14, 2022 at 12:59 am

Re:

Nice try, John Smith.

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